

**DOES IT MATTER WHAT CHURCH YOU  
BELONG TO? . . .  
WHY AM I A PRESBYTERIAN AFTER ALL  
THESE YEARS?**

**September 13, 2009**

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FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

**Psalm 19  
Matthew 16: 13-20**

**“On this rock I will build my church”  
Matthew 16: 18 (NRSV)**

**A Presbyterian minister visited us  
in our modest apartment in seminary  
married student housing, a big old Hyde  
Park house that had been converted  
into seven small apartments. We were  
young, 550 miles from home, pretty  
much alone, and we had a new baby.  
Ulysses B. Blakely was his name, he was  
African American, co-pastor along with**

**Charles T. Leber Jr., who was white, of the First Presbyterian Church of Chicago, located at 64<sup>th</sup> and Woodlawn. Buck and Chuck, they were known affectionately, were ministers in a church unlike any I had ever experienced. The congregation was integrated, about half black and half white. I had never seen that before. The two pastors were a bold experiment in interracial ministry. I had grown up with and known a few African American children of railroad porters, housekeepers, our city policemen. One of my enduring memories is of Ulysses Blakely, sitting in a folding chair in our little apartment, holding in his strong dark hands, our four-week old tiny white baby daughter. As I have pondered the question “Why Am I a Presbyterian?”**

**and the larger question of how any of us becomes who we are, I concluded that that moment was one of the moments when I became a Presbyterian.**

**I was baptized a Presbyterian, taken to Sunday School and worship, but my denominational loyalties were not deep. I suppose we all wonder if we had been born something else, Roman Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, whether we would have lived it out and claimed it as our religious home.**

**In the 1960s it was fashionable to criticize the church as a distortion of and distraction from true Christianity, a pious enclave for like-minded, and mostly narrow-minded people. It was First Presbyterian, Chuck and Buck, who**

**caused me to reexamine and, along the way, to reclaim the faith tradition of my childhood as my own. First Presbyterian had black and white people sitting together in the pews on Sunday morning, black and white children in Sunday School and youth groups, and better music than I had ever heard in church. It was an important part of its changing neighborhood. A few years later, after the violence and radical neighborhood change in Woodlawn, First Presbyterian hung on and kept reaching out, now inviting the notorious Blackstone Rangers to use the church hall for meetings: the pastor ultimately convincing the gang members to deposit weapons in the church safe, a move the police didn't approve and raided the church and confiscated the weapons,**

**ending an initiative that had at least a possibility of redemption. The minister, John Fry, was subpoenaed to appear before a congressional panel on organized crime, and the minister of this church, my predecessor, Elam Davies, flew to Washington to testify on his behalf. How could you not love a church like that? It was a long way from the church of my childhood and beginning with Buck Blakely holding my new baby to the Blackstone Rangers' guns in the church safe, it was, and remains one of the reasons I am a Presbyterian still.**

**It is, as everyone knows, an interesting time for the Christian Church, and particularly for the Protestant denomination, the old mainline denominations: United Church**

**of Christ, Methodist, Episcopal, Baptist, Lutheran, Presbyterian. We have all been losing members for 40 years, or more accurately not replacing old ones. There are 2.1 million members of our denomination, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) - 40 years ago there were 4 million. The statistics are similar for the other denominations. There are reasons: declining birth rate is one: Presbyterians stopped reproducing themselves about 40 years ago. Demographics is another - Presbyterian churches are located in old neighborhoods that have undergone radical change. Entire populations have left. First Presbyterian Church had 1,200 members 50 years ago. Today it has 150. In the meantime, the original ethnic identity of the old denomination**

**has totally disappeared. English  
Episcopalian, Scots Presbyterian,  
German Lutheran - no longer a factor.  
In our market culture, people choose  
churches on the basis of the music,  
quality of education, convenience and  
parking. Robert Schuler, founder of the  
Crystal Cathedral, one of the first  
megachurches, once famously said that  
the one absolute necessity for a growing  
church is a parking lot.**

**Megachurches thrive, placed  
strategically geographically, with new  
facilities and plenty of parking and no  
visible denominational connection.  
Independent churches thrive.  
Pentecostal churches thrive. Some are  
saying that it is the post denominational  
age: that the era that began with the**

**birth of different kinds of churches in the Reformation 500 years ago is over and we are at the beginning of a new age. Every denominational headquarters is downsizing. Congregations are giving more money than ever for mission, but less of it goes to denominational headquarters and denominational mission.**

**Globally, Christianity is growing dramatically - by far the world's largest religion, but the center of gravity is shifting south and the new center geographically will not be Rome, Canterbury or Geneva, but somewhere in Africa. The Church is still the number one provider of health care and education in the world and our own Presbyterian mission workers are all**

**over the world: Africa, Asia, South and Central America in schools, hospitals, clinics, churches.**

**Some historians are saying that we are actually at the beginning of a new reformation with old ways of being the church slowly dying and new ways struggling to be born. How appropriate that 2009 is the 500<sup>th</sup> birthday of one of the figures most responsible for the first reformation, John Calvin, the father of our particular religious tradition - Presbyterian-Reformed. And so a series of sermons about him, John Calvin, his thinking, his life, and the importance in global history of what he started. Along the way we will look at some of the ideas with which he is associated - Predestination, for instance, but also**

**the socially and politically potent notion of the sanctity of the human conscience.**

**I brushed up on Calvin in my summer reading this year and even though it was not always easy and Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* is not exactly "beach reading," I'm glad I did.**

**He was born in 1509 in Noyon, France, and from an early age an exceptional intellect. He attended the University of Paris to study theology, changed his mind and moved to Orleans to study law. He was first and foremost a classical humanist scholar and wanted most to study, write and teach - the life of a scholar. New Renaissance Humanism was the intellectual fashion,**

**with its emphasis on recovering classical Greek and Roman literature, its rediscovery of music and the arts. Michelangelo was working on the Sistine Chapel the year Calvin was born. The other influence in Calvin's early life was the new religious thinking coming from Wittenberg, Germany, where Martin Luther, and Augustine monk and scholar, had broken with Rome - actually Rome excommunicated Luther. Calvin and other French intellectuals were interested, then intrigued, and Calvin, now back in Paris, was identified with the new thinking. The French monarchy took a very dim view of the whole matter. Scholars were arrested, interrogated, imprisoned, a few were executed. John Calvin fled and spent the rest of his life in exile from his**

**native France. He found fellow scholars influenced by Reformation thinking in Strassbourg and eventually ended up in Geneva, an independent Swiss city state that had recently decided to be a Protestant city, offering the Roman Catholic clergy the opportunity to become Protestant ministers or leave. Some stayed. Some left. Calvin remained in Geneva from 1536 until his death, at the age of 55, in 1564, with the exception of a three-year hiatus, 1538-1541, during which the City Council of Geneva unceremoniously threw him out. By force of his intellect and physical stamina, disciple and absolute devotion to God and what he absolutely believed was the will of God, Calvin became the leader of the Geneva Church and clergy, its primary scholar**

**and in many ways Geneva's most important citizen. He had opinions on everything and expressed them with vehemence that bordered on arrogance. One of his biographers, Yale's Bruce Gordon, in a new book says Calvin was the greatest Reformer - he was also a "great hater" and believed he had never met his intellectual equal and was probably correct. His intellectual output was prodigious, almost unbelievable. He preached from the pulpit of the Cathedral of St. Pierre in the center of Geneva, several times every week, lectured daily to the company of pastors, wrote commentaries on most of the books of the Bible, wrote essays, letters to kings and emperors, bishops and scholars, was the moderator of the Consistory, a representative body of**

**ministers and laity to govern the affairs of the church, attended and eventually sat on the city council, helped design the city sewer system, established a charitable agency to assist the thousands of religious refugees flocking to Geneva, maintained a household always full of guests and visiting scholars, enjoyed wine, music and well appointed women, and lived with a long list of devastating physical ailments characteristic of his age. By the time he died every political and religious leader in Europe knew of him, had read him and had an opinion about him.**

**To try to enter his world, the world of 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe, or even to get your mind round it, as I tried to do this summer, is a little like Dorothy getting**

**caught in a tornado, tossed in the land of Oz and observing “this isn’t Kansas.”**

**It was a time when people died and killed for religious reasons, a time when governments prosecuted, exiled and executed citizens for religious reasons, a time when heresy - wrong religious thinking - was a capital offense. We have a very difficult time with all of that and the reason is that we are beneficiaries of an idea that is only about 250 years old - namely the separation of Church and State. Some of John Calvin’s ideas would ultimately be influential in the concept of Church and State - absolutely separate, but at the time it was simply unimaginable. The operating idea for 1,500 years was that a person’s religion was what the**

**ruler said it was. Individual choice had nothing to do with it. In fact, there was no choice. The ruler the King, the Emperor, the City Council decided and everyone became what he was. If a German Prince, for whatever reason, tired of Rome and sided with Luther, all his subjects became Lutherans overnight. If the King of France decided to remain loyal to the Papacy, too bad for the Protestants - the Huguenots - who were massacred. If the Geneva Arts Council decided to side with the Reformation - the churches became Protestant and the priests ministers overnight. And furthermore everyone agreed that this arrangement was absolutely necessary for the peace and order of society and the security of the state. So - heresy - became a political**

**crime, a crime against the authority of the State and therefore the State executed heretics.**

**Calvin himself was part of this mentality. There was no room for Catholics in Geneva and when a famous heretic by the name of Severetus, already with a death sentence by both Geneva Lutherans and French Catholics showed up in Geneva, he was arrested, put on trial by the city council and burned at the stake. It is not a pretty moment in our history.**

**It can be said of very few people that they changed human history. John Calvin is one of them. *The New York Times*' Peter Steinfels says that Calvin "did as much as anyone to shape the**

**modern world: his legacy has been traced to everything from modern marriage and modern science to modern liberal government and modern capitalism.” Max Weber’s classic *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* traces the emergence of free markets, credit and high productivity based on hard work directly to the thinking of John Calvin.**

**There is a direct philosophic line from John Calvin on political liberty to the Declaration of Independence and United States Constitution.**

**As I watched the President address Congress on health care Wednesday night, it occurred to me that the whole drama, the rigorous debate, the**

**people's representatives, the underlying concern for the welfare of the people and the State's role in it - it was a great Calvinist moment.**

**From John Calvin comes the idea that authority in the church and the political arena comes not from the top down but from bottom up: that people have the God-given right to elect leaders in the churches and in their political entities.**

**From John Calvin comes the idea that Christian faith and Christian theology ought to be subject to the same critical scholarship as any other human enterprise-education.**

**From John Calvin comes the idea that the truth of God transcends human attempts to express it - in a hierarchy or a creed and that Christians are responsible to seek new truth and new ways to express it in every age.**

**From Calvin - and Luther - comes the idea that faith is the absolute certainty of God's benevolence toward us in Jesus Christ, dependent on nothing in us or about us, but only on the grace of God.**

**From Calvin comes the idea that religion is authentically expressed not just inside the church, but in the marketplace, the halls of government, the city streets - in the way people live in society.**

**And from John Calvin comes the idea that there are many ways to be the church, not just one. Does it matter what church you belong to? Not really - this is one way and a pretty good way after all.**

**I'm still a Presbyterian because long before there was a Presbyterian Church, or a Reformation, or a Roman Catholic church, 2,000 years ago, to be precise, a man I believe was the Son of God, one time looked a good friend in the face and said "You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church."**

**Long before there was a Presbyterian Church or Catholic Church there was a tiny company of followers**

**who decided together to be his men and women, to figure out together how to follow him and be his body on earth, after he was gone, his church.**

**They knew they could not do it alone: to follow him they needed one another. I'm a churchman because I still believe that. I can't follow him alone. I need the church to receive my faith and commitment such as it is and join it to your faith and commitment and the faith of 2.1 million other Presbyterians and the faith and commitment of 100s of millions of others - to heal and teach and help justice and peace in the world in his name.**

**In the middle of thinking about this sermon a Presbyterian minister died,**

**pastor of the Bethel Presbyterian Church in Kingston, Tennessee, one of the more than 10,000 PC(USA) congregations in our country. His name is Marc Sherrod. He was 51 years old, and I know him because his brother Martin Sherrod is a colleague on the staff of this church and a long-time member of the congregation.**

**When he died after a heroic battle with cancer, leaving a wife and four children, I looked up the church's website and found the "Minister's Welcome" along with a handsome picture of Mark in his Geneva robe.**

**I'm a Presbyterian because of what Marc said about Bethel Presbyterian Church, not because it was unique, but**

**because it was so solid, so  
quintessentially Presbyterian.**

**Marc told where he studied, his  
academic degrees and academic  
interests. He explained that Bethel  
Church is one of over 10,000  
Presbyterian churches with roots in the  
16<sup>th</sup> century Reformation. He explained  
that Bethel Presbyterian Church has  
been ordaining women for years and  
believes that its mission is not only to  
transform individual lives but also the  
structures and systems of society so  
that all - particularly the downtrodden  
and oppressed are cared for. He said  
that Bethel Church is happy to  
cooperate with other churches and  
invests its money to feed the hungry,  
visit prisoners in a nearby correctional**

**facility, provide funds to help unemployed people with utility bills and sponsors a Scout troop for 50 boys.**

**Marc concluded by saying that since every Sunday is a “little Easter,” celebrating the new life in the risen Christ - we bring to God the best we have in response to the abundance of all that has been given and done for us.**

**“Everything” Marc said, “reflects our belief that we belong to God, and that in Christ God has entrusted us with ministries of love, justice, reconciliation and compassion.**

**I thanked God for Marc Sherrod: his life and ministry: and for the tradition -**

**the Presbyterian tradition - that  
nurtured him.**

**I'm a Presbyterian because I love  
this tradition. It's not the only one, but  
it's a good one. I commend it to you.**

**Amen**